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ABSTRACT

A classroom study in two advanced Chinese language courses compared the effectiveness of two instructional strategies: (1) proficiency-based instruction through cooperative learning (Chinese 405) and (2) "prochievement," a hybrid, performance-based strategy derived from both proficiency and achievement approaches (Chinese 406). Subjects were six students enrolled in the two successive classes, tested with an oral proficiency interview at the beginning of the first course and after each course. Both courses had the theme "Contemporary China and Chinese Culture." Results suggest that students made more progress in the course emphasizing prochievement, with all students advancing at least one level on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency scale. In the fall (cooperative learning) class, only half the students had a measurable proficiency gain. A more comprehensive study is recommended to investigate this phenomenon further. Contains 17 references. A chart comparing the content and goals of achievement, proficiency, and prochievement tests is appended. (MSE)

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Prochievement In light of SOPI and OPI: Activities for Advanced Speakers of Chinese

This paper presented at the ACTFL annual national convention held by
the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Anaheim, CA, on Nov. 20, 1995.

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Introduction

Upshur (1969) indicated that trends in language **testing** have been inclined to pursue trends of language **instruction** and, language instruction has been inclined to follow trends in **linguistics**. Since the 1980s, the hallmark of the linguistic movement has been *communicative competence*, and foreign language testing philosophy has rapidly followed suit. The communicative-based proficiency assessment promoted by ACTFL (1989) provides strong evidence of this trend matching. The instruction arena however, is the part where progress in certain places has been made, but not in all. There are voices and responses from practitioners which vary from supporters' unbridled enthusiasm, to traditionalists' unwillingness to change and thorough rejection (Byrnes, 1987). Lifted up by the theory of communicative competence, Heilenman and Kaplan (1986) and others (Byrnes 1987; Omaggio 1987) claim that foreign language classes need to place an emphasis on functional language use in their curriculum and instruction. This has generated a great deal of attention. The area that practitioners need to pay attention to is how to make appropriate curricular content responsive to students' real needs at their levels: to help them become functionally proficient at something, to some degree. As a teacher and learner with an open mind in this profession, the researcher reviewed the literature and developed two communicative curricula , in Fall 1994 and Spring 1995, with an intended goal and outcome to achieve: namely, better proficiency. Based on ACTFL's Guidelines, the intended outcome was to see the Advanced Chinese learners, at Connecticut College, improve their oral proficiency, such as advancing half or one level above where they were in the ACTFL's rating scale. At the Advanced class, the student are expected to be able to talk about some specific topics that are potentially challenging, abstract and likely to be involved in their L2 context of daily conversation in the real-world. Though the goal of the two semesters was the same, the treatments were different. In Fall, 1994, the class was conducted ***cooperative learning*** pedagogy, whereas the Spring class used ***prochievement*** as class activities. The aim of this study is to see how the infusion of the two pedagogical treatments impacts upon this group of L2 Advanced learners: Is cooperative learning group's proficiency improved more than the prochievement group?

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Research Question

In order to yield data for this investigation, one research question is asked:
Is cooperative learning pedagogy more effective to help students improve their proficiency than prochievement in the Advanced L2 speakers class?

This action research is a preliminary pilot study, conducted by a teacher as a researcher. It is hoped that the results of this study will help exemplify the models of interactive communicative curriculum and teaching that are beneficial to second language class. Finally, some implications can be drawn to direct a well-rounded research to follow in the near future.

Background

The syllabi of these two courses, Chinese 405 and Chinese 406, were evolved around the theme "Contemporary China and Chinese Culture". A variety of selected films, TV short stories, articles and newspaper clips that reflect life of our real-world were used for reading, discussion and presentation, to enhance students' functional language use. The students are expected to monitor their own progress, toward a sustaining discourse-length performance of communication in all skills: reading, speaking, listening and writing. The students overall semester grade is composed by five activities: weekly free writings, class participation, a self-directed research paper, student's class portfolio and a final oral proficiency interview. This paper only discusses their improvement in their Oral Proficiency Interview performance.

In Chinese 405, the implementation of proficiency-based curriculum was *cooperative learning*. Cooperative learning is known for its emphasis on (a) less threatening, (b)increasing the amount of student participation in the classroom, (c) reducing the need for competitiveness, and (d) reducing the teacher's dominance in the classroom. This approach values students working together in a small co-operative teams: students coaching each other, and students progress at their own rate through individualized learning materials. In team projects, each team member may have their own individual talents and learning styles, each individual contributes to a team grade.

The pedagogical concern that helped implemented Chinese 406 was *prochievement*.. Hendrickson (1992) claim that prochievement tests are hybrids of proficiency and achievement test. Since proficiency testing tests what a person can do with the language and achievement tests what was taught, *prochievement* testing is to help students better proficient at some topics, to a degree. It is hope that the use of prochievement can provide students opportunities to practice ad

repeat application of what they learned. As McLaughlin (1987) pointed out that *through practice and application* in the process of learning, the learners' receptive and productive skills eventually improve from ***"control processes"*** to ***"automatic processes"***. This then will yield learners' better accuracy and fluency. It is the researcher's belief that prochievement results can be obtained through direct method and indirect method, namely performance activities. While both tests offer teachers' diagnostic feedback to students, direct testing give students grades, indirect testing document students' performance with teachers or peers' oral or written comment instead of grade. When students' receive grades, the test is norm-referenced and the indirect method is criterion-referenced, and this provides in-depth supportive comment of students' strength and weakness. Both direct and indirect methods give the teachers a class norm for reference, and use that to design new lesson plans to lead the students further advance their level of proficiency in real-life communication. Unlike proficiency testing, prochievement can be done often and periodically with designated goals and designs to help students control and improve their specific communication behaviors (See Appendix A).

Method

Subject

The data were made possible eventually from a group of six students, in both Chinese 405 in Fall 1994 and Chinese 406, Spring 1995, at Connecticut College. Among them, five students were Seniors at the time and except one has no experience of which had half to one year, or more, of study-broad experience in Taiwan. Another student was a Sophomore who has begun Chinese before he entered the College for about two to three years. Though they were all placed in the Advanced class, their individual level of proficiency were ranged from Intermediate-Mid to Advanced level at the beginning of Fall 1994. The six students are all male.

Treatment

Before giving any type of treatment, each class had an initiation oral proficiency interview as an entrance test and at the end of each treatment in each class, the students received a second oral proficiency interview as an exit test. The class treatments are as follow:

Control group: Cooperative learning, Fall, 1994

After the teacher collected the entrance test data, the teacher, then, consciously promoted the learning environment in an interactive, supportive, cooperative atmosphere. In class, many collaborative learning opportunities were offered to involved the students to help each other, and putting together their group collaborative performance, and the teacher also re-grouped the students with other members to ensure more opportunities for individual exchange.

(1)Student-centered activities and offering help to each other: Every single activity in each class aimed to elicit interactive talking, negotiation and learning from each other. Teacher spent ten minutes for laying out a topic's background information and students in pair or threesome to discuss and compose a final conclusion for the last ten minutes of individual group report. Each careful selected topic for class discussion, debate or student-to-student interview were designed to appear in the class once in the entire semester.

The pedagogy of this approach included:

1. Student-centered approach, placing more emphasis on the learner.
2. Using authentic materials for input, e.g. newspaper advertisement, short articles.
3. Creating conditions for contextualized practice, e.g. situational role-play
4. Achieving truth-telling and personalization, e.g. students' own view of college/American culture
5. Spiraling and expanding the grammar core, e.g. narration of sequential events
6. Developing strategies for managing and planning small group practice, e.g., students' mutual telephone interviews on the campus.
7. Abandoning the search for "the method" and developing strategies and activities most appropriate for a given level of learner proficiency, e.g. practice negotiation, persuasion, public speech to help the students develop communication strategies.
8. Providing specific guidance about how students could reach the next functional level, e.g. contrasting for students the specific differences between speakers' behaviors at the Advanced and Superior levels.

(2) In-class assessment: Students' class participation, weekly free writing, self-directed research project and a individual portfolio are overall component of their grade. Group activities of cooperative learning were usually graded based on a scale of five criteria: bad, not good, good, very good, excellent (See Appendix B).

Experimental group: Prochievement in Action

Supported by McLaughlin's control and automatic processes in L2 language acquisition theory, the researcher placed an emphases on the control of linguistic accuracy and function at this stage. In acquiring accuracy and appropriate functional use of the language, prochievement tests were employed in every class but some times in its direct term, some times only indirectly evaluated students' performance but not giving a grade. The implementation at this stage is in follow:

(1) Sharing the intended goal and OPI and SOPI techniques: In light of prochievement, in the beginning of the Advanced Chinese II, techniques of OPI and Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (CAL, 1992) and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines were introduced to the class to ensure their understanding of the goal of their own, as well as specific linguistic behaviors that Advanced or Superior speakers typically perform. That is to say, the L2 learners at this stage are expected to **not only describe, narrate but also to discuss extensively by supporting opinions, abstracting and hypothesizing.** The OPI interviewer's elicitation techniques and accountable interviewees' performance were demonstrated and such a technique was adopted in student-to-student interview activities in class. The teacher also created some situational, picture-based and similar topics that may be seen in Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview(CAL, 1992) for class activities. Using SOPI's picture description task was frequently adopted to help the students main lower anxiety. Many small segments of a OPI or SOPI were employed to involve the students to experience some topics and practice some specific linguistic aspects. For instance, in one class, the teacher only led the students working on ***linguistic function*** of description, while next class the group then particularly worked on the art of making comparison, or narration, or explaining and supporting ideas, etc. The same topic may be purposely appear in three consecutive classes but the students were required to practice and perform with different linguistic functions. Students were asked to exchanged partners from one practice to another, so that advanced speaker may challenge his partner spiraling the topic from simple up to complicated issues. While the partner may be different, the same topic may certainly be recycled. When the students' performance at any particular task was weak, the teacher had the students practice over again of learned materials with various peers.

(2) Diagnostic feedback and students' self-monitoring behaviors: The teacher often offered suggestive devices and appropriate grammar structure within contexts and right after the students' discussion. When students showed avoidance of unknown or complex structures, the teacher introduced few formulaic expressions soon enough to help individual student improve

their choice of words, communication strategies and communication skills. When a learner's speech needed to be repair, the teacher supplied only what the student wanted to make the repairment more closer to L2-based instead of L1 based.

Based on McLaughlin's theory of learning and controlled processes, the significance of L2 learners' self-monitoring behavior was specifically explained at the first week of this Spring semester and the students were immediately asked to hold responsibility and take initiatives for their own action. Whenever the teacher supported feedback to the students, the students were expected to initiate the process of paying special attention to, perceive the errors and practice on those diagnostic feedback to avoid the same mistake, or to ensure a better, automatized linguistic production. The students seemed to understand that actively working at weak or new linguistic or grammar aspects will enhance their own perceptive and productive communicative competence.

(3) In-class assessment: Though there were group activities but grades were all individualized. In direct prochievement tests, students received their individual grades on their performance after practices of reports, interview, speech, narratives, debate, skit or role-play. In indirect method, one student often asked to evaluate two other people's performance and document their strength and weakness, then report his comment on it. The teacher also walked around observed their performance and provided feedback suggesting their further practice, striving for excellence. The teacher did reflective and analytic thinking and planning based on the results of each direct and indirect prochievement test, and then design new lesson plan combined with old material if the old goal was not achieved in a satisfactory fashion.

Measure

The full-fledged OPI assessment was conducted, at the beginning and the end of both classes. The students were prompted to describe, narrate, explain and to compare, and giving instruction or direction. Both tests took place and audio taped during office hours in the teacher's office. These four measures were all conducted by the class teacher who though was not certified at the time but had experience learned and trained by the ACTFL-certified OPI trainer, and obtained good working knowledge of OPI technique. Based on performance in the interviews, each student was assigned a global rating referring to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines(1989). Besides measuring by the criteria of linguistic functions, context, content, accuracy and text type the levels on the scale according to the Proficiency Guidelines are: Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, Novice-High, Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, Intermediate-High, Advanced and Advanced-High, and Superior.

Analysis

The Advanced speakers are expected to demonstrate their level-appropriate specific behaviors, skills and functional language use. The result of rating in this study based on the ACTFL scale with capital letter, and the researcher also documented the students' distinctive language use individually. To illustrate the difference between the two classes, the ACTFL's nine levels on the scale were translated into numeric value from one to nine beginning from Novice-Low to Superior level. The progress between the second week and the fifteenth week of each class were calculated (See table on Appendix C). Basic descriptive statistics were computed to see the increment of each student's progress.

Results

According to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, speakers in the advanced range are able to sustain conversation and their speech samples display feature-specific behaviors and skills. After the two semesters of entire investigation on these specific feature-specific skills, the findings answer to the research questions are: The course with prochievement approach seems a bit more effective to the Advanced L2 class than the group without this emphases, but the two group are almost about the same degree of effectiveness.

What type of curriculum and instruction design is more effective to the Advanced L2 speakers in class? Is using prochievement approach to enhance this kind of class beneficial to improvement of proficiency?

According to the result on the table (appendix C), the class controlled with cooperative learning is contributive to the L2 learners' growth, but only three out of six learners made their headway. The class with the implementation of prochievement testing and learning activity seemed to have help the L2 learners advanced at least one level up on the scale. The participants in this class had each improved their proficiency. Subject B is the one overall made two giant level jumps, who apparently made non-stop progress since September 1995.

If one take another closer look, one will find the control group started out with only two Advanced speakers and the class average level was also below Advanced level (6.16), and by the end of Fall, 1994, the group though remained at the same level of proficiency, yet it totally

climbed half-a-level (=.5) up on the scale. A fifty percent of total population improved their proficiency.

By the end of Spring, 1995, the experiment prochievement group moved one full step to the mile post of Advanced-High, at the point of 7.33, because every learner in the group made upward steps. The group progress point this time was .76 which is a little more than half-a-step.

Conclusion

Using the form of prochievement testing, in short period of time, in class, as a mean for mini speaking test and performance activity can lead the L2 learners to practice what they should know, learn and improve. The approach valued diagnostic feedback and proved flexibility to interpretative any individual's performance by norm-referenced and criterion-referenced in hand. However, cooperative learning may not be as goal specific and evaluative as proficiency approach, it is quite an effective method to have in class. Cooperative learning emphasizes group spirits, sharing and helping, working as a group, whereas prochievement classroom is somewhat goal-oriented, and test driven. The result of this finding has limited to only one year with the same group of experiment. There are may questions may be asked: (1) Students usually do a lot better in second-half of the school year, since language learning is an cumulative process: the longer one study, the better one can control over all four skills. (2) It might be more convincing if the research can expend another year or two in which in turn, using prochievement in Fall semester and cooperative learning approach in Spring with a lot more samples. Finally, the implication can be drawn is that future research should investigate the effect by supporting more sample, having two groups with similar background and beginning and end of experimenting the two pedagogy at the same time.

Some proficiency advocates said "Proficiency does not grow on trees. It builds on achievement". Others said that "Achievement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for proficiency. However, if one feel prochievement testing causing students' anxiety and competitiveness is difficult to bear, cooperative learning can still be a great model to promote learners' communicative competence.

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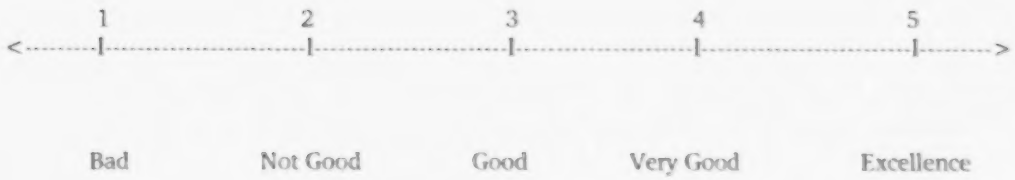
Appendix A

Content and Goal of Achievement, Proficiency, and Pro-chievement tests

Achievement Test	Proficiency Test	Pro-chievement Test
Testing what was taught. --- Not necessary personalized topics. Closed-ended questions.	Testing what a person can do with the language. --- Personalized topics. Open-ended questions.	The goal is to help students better proficient at some topics, to a degree. --- It may involved both personalized and non-personalized topics.
Limited, traditional material. (Linked to textbooks)	Unlimited material from the real-life situation. (No linked to textbooks.)	Renewal of traditional materials combining with real-life situational questions. (Adopted materials when it is needed.)
Norm-referenced result.	Criterion-referenced result.	Both norm-referenced & criterion-referenced results.
Given often by classroom teachers.	Given only after major mileposts by trained testers.	Teachers as researchers who have a working knowledge of OPI/SOPI and would like to give students tests in certain time intervals.
Helpful to teachers to identify the weakness of their students. --- Practical for students in getting find-tuned diagnostic feedback.	Good for predicting students' competence in real-life performance.	Beneficial for students to gain better control in their proficiency test. --- Practical for teachers to provide specific feedback, as an achievement test, and at the same time to help students to advance their levels of proficiency in real-life communication.

Appendix B

5 level scale for assessing group cooperative learning activities:



Appendix C

OPI Performance in Fall, 1994 and Spring, 1995, rated by the ACTFL OPI scale of nine levels:

Level:	N-L	N-M	N-H	I-L	I-M	I-H	A	A-H	S
Numeric value:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

<----------I----------I----------I----------I----------I----------I---------- I----------I----------I------->

	Fall '94-cooperative learning			Spring '95-prochievement activities		
Subject, (rating and its numeric value)	2nd week (i)	15th week	Advance level (15th-2nd) =	2nd week	15th week (ii)	Sept. '94 to May '95 Level advanced (ii)- (i)=
A (Wan)	A 7	A 7	0	A 7	A-H 8	1
B (Liu)	I-H 6	A 7	1	A 7	A-H 8	2
C (Shang)	A 7	A 7	0	A 7	A-H 8	1
D (Luo)	I-M 5	I-H 6	1	I-H 6	I-H 6	1
E (chen)	I-H 6	I-H 6	0	IH 6	A 7	1
F (Gao)	I-H 6	A 7	1	A 7	A 7	1
Class level in numeric value (N/6)=	6.16	6.66	6.66-6.16 = .5	6. 66	7. 33 7.33-6.66= 0. 67	1.16
Level of the class in Letter	Between I-H>----A	Between I-H---->A	Entire group advanced half level	Between I-H----A	Between A>------A-H	Entire group advanced one level